

LESSON TEXT: Ecclesiastes 1:1---3:22

Prepared by Paul T. Butler, Th.D.

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS:

If ever a human being had it all it was Solomon, king of Israel. He wrote his memoirs about 2500 years ago in the book we call Ecclesiastes. Relatively speaking, he had more personal fortune than Bill Gates, more political power and prestige than the President of the United States, more learning and wisdom than any human philosopher and scientist before him or after. He partook (sensibly) in every pleasure and entertainment imaginable. There was not a whim or curiosity about earthly life he could not satisfy (2:10). Millions of people dream about being able to live the life Solomon lived! Millions drive themselves mercilessly with work, play, and indulgence trying to get where Solomon was! They do not hesitate to exploit family, friends, and everyone else to get the biggest piece of life's "pie" they can on this earth.

So why did Solomon write, "Meaningless! Meaningless! *Utterly* meaningless! *Everything* is meaningless!" (Eccl. 1:2, NIV). He tasted every slice of the pie of life--good and bad--with gusto. He tells it like it is. No euphemisms, no hedging, no idealizing, no fantasizing—he uses the Hebrew word *hovel*, i.e., "meaningless" or "vanity" 36 times.

It would be easy to get deeply depressed and cynical about life by a cursory reading of Ecclesiastes. But Solomon qualified his melancholy and gloom by saying that everything "under the sun" is meaningless. That phrase ("under the sun") appears 28 times in this book along with synonymous phrases "under heaven" and "on the earth." **Everything** was **not** meaningless to Solomon--just life on earth **without God**.

Solomon mentions God 36 times in Ecclesiastes. Everything comes from God's hand; what God does endures forever; every good thing comes from God's hand; God will judge; go to the house of God; God gives life to enjoy; reverence God, etc., etc. Solomon's solution to the vanity of life on this earth is to "Fear God and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man" 12:13. TAKE SOLOMON'S ADVICE, BE IN BIBLE SCHOOL, BE WITH GOD!

QUESTIONS:

1. Does the NT say anything about the meaninglessness of life under the sun? 1:1-7 See Rom. 8:18-25. Can't someone think of something new under the sun? 1:8-11
2. Is the Bible anti-education? 1:12-18
3. If pleasure and laughter are meaningless why does the entertainment-world command so much of the world's time and money? 2:1-3
4. Isn't there meaning in working, building, farming, making one's fortune--Isn't that what life's all about? 2:4-11
5. If the same fate overtakes you whether you're wise or foolish, why not live foolishly? 2:12-16
6. Do you hate to think all you've worked for will have to be left behind to those who may not appreciate it or fritter it away? 2:17-23
7. What does Solomon advise as a cure for the meaninglessness of life under the sun? 2:24-26
8. Who schedules all these times? 3:1-8. Don't you think life is more a matter of chance or spontaneity than Solomon pictures it?
9. If everything is beautiful why do we have the word ugly in our vocabulary? 3:9-11
10. How has God put eternity in the hearts of men? 3:11-17 (see Romans chs. 1, 2, & 8). Hasn't God also put justice in man's heart?

"Three things are necessary for a happy old age: health, money and friends. One survey of people over 70 revealed that given a choice between being rich and being healthy in their sunset years, many would choose being rich. Money gets you attention. Sometimes it is the only thing that does, even from your own family, answered one respondent."

--George Plagenz, columnist, *Joplin (MO) Globe*, 7-6-2001

"In diving to the bottom of pleasure we bring up more gravel than pearls."

--Honoré de Balzac

LESSON TEXT: Ecclesiastes 4:1---6:12

Prepared by Paul T. Butler, Th.D.

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS:

In today's lesson, Solomon writes that one of the things that makes life meaningless for some people **under the sun** is that they are all alone, without family, without companionship, and without anyone to help in time of need (4:1-12).

"One of the prominent symptoms of our times is loneliness. Isn't it ironic that in an age of the greatest population explosion the world has ever known, more people than ever before are desperately lonely? Even the high-rise apartments in our big cities are monuments to loneliness. There is aching loneliness behind those doors for many people. I know of those, both in the city and in the suburbs, who go to the large shopping centers (malls) simply for the opportunity to talk to somebody in the store. At least the checkers will speak to them as they go out. Loneliness is one of the desperate problems of our age."—Paul E. Little, in *Quote, Unquote*, 1977

Charles Swindoll writes, "The neighborhood bar is possibly the best *counterfeit* there is to the fellowship Christ wants to give his church. It's an imitation, dispensing liquor instead of grace, escape rather than reality, but it is a permissive, accepting and inclusive fellowship. It is unshockable. It is democratic. You can tell people secrets and they usually don't tell others or even want to. The bar flourishes not because most people are alcoholics, but because God has put into the human heart the desire to know and be known, to love and be loved, and so many seek a *counterfeit*...With all my heart I believe that Christ wants his church to be a fellowship where people can come in and say, I'm sunk! I've had it!"-- *Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life*, 1983

***You, dear Christian, today, find someone who may be lonely, take Jesus with you, and give them the gift of companionship.***

QUESTIONS:

1. Would you rather be dead than oppressed? 4:1-3 Why would the Christian take a different view of oppression?
2. Are you caught up in the vanity of striving to achieve because you envy your contemporaries? 4:4-6 Could this ever be a problem in Christian ministry?
3. Is it human relationships (friends & family) that give meaning to life? 4:8-10. Or is it personal success?
4. Could we find more meaning in life with more awe of God? 5:1-7
5. Would it be meaningless to you to be as rich as Solomon or Bill Gates? 5:8-17 Why do people believe having lots of money would make their lives more meaningful?
6. "Enjoy yourself, it's later than you think"--does God really want us to enjoy life? 5:18-20 How can a Christian enjoy life when he is supposed to renounce all that he has? (Lk. 14:33).
7. What does proper burial have to do with giving meaning to life? 6:1-6
8. The more the words, the less the meaning--do you believe that? 6:7-12

"Loneliness is spending your days alone with your thoughts, your discouragements, having no one with whom to talk and share your thoughts. The cure for loneliness is not a pill or suicide. It is a person. The lonely person needs a person, or persons. Someone with whom

he can share his dreams, his dreads, his disappointments. Life is lonely until it finds such. The lonely person cannot wait for another to enter his life and dispel the loneliness. He must, first, begin the journey into another's life, through service, caring, and helping. Then, chances are, he will find his loneliness vanishing. And he will probably have filled another's lonely hours too."

---C. Neil Strait, in *Quote, Unquote*, 1977

There is a Person with whom you may share your thoughts, dreams and disappointments. He is invisible, but he's just as alive as you are, and, if you want, he will come and sup with you. He knocks at the door of your heart every day.

HE IS JESUS (Rev. 3:20).---PTB

LESSON TEXT: Ecclesiastes 7:1---8:17

Prepared by Paul T. Butler, Th.D.

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS:

Solomon was in a position and lived long enough to see much injustice done by some humans to other humans. The way he writes in 8:1-15, you'd think he lived in the 21<sup>st</sup> century A.D. Why is it that a much-loved school teacher is deliberately murdered by a 13 year old student? And why is that student not sentenced to forfeit his life? Or at least to life imprisonment? Why is it that the Mafia gets rich on porno shops, the sale of mind-twisting drugs, prostitution, and illegal gambling, and you and I can barely make ends meet, even though we try to walk with God. Why is it that a sweet, loving Christian family traveling down a highway is hit head-on by an irresponsible drunk driver who walks away without a scratch, is put on probation and allowed to go back driving, while the family members are all killed? Why do powerful politicians, entertainment and sports celebrities commit crimes or obstruct justice without punishment while ordinary citizens pay the full penalty for their misdeeds? Once the TV and newspapers are through with their feeding frenzies on these tragic mysteries of life, they are soon forgotten.

So how do we handle the mysteries and injustices? What do we do with those unsolved questions--those unjust triumphs and unfair consequences? Charles Swindoll, in his book, *Living On The Ragged Edge*, 1985, makes three suggestions: "(1) We must admit: 'I am only human'---and admit it daily. We must not become so impressed with our spiritual redemption that we forget that we are human, finite, and fallible. (2) We must each admit: I don't understand why--and I may never on this earth learn why. We must then try our best, by the power of God, not to let that affect our faith. In fact, we should ask God to use that lack of knowledge to *deepen* our faith. (3) We must each admit: I cannot bring about a change--even though I try and do everything I know to do I still can't change some situations. We can't explain or solve all the injustices; some we must simply wait upon the Lord to resolve." **Christians rejoice that eventually divine, absolute, and impartial justice will be meted out either on earth or in heaven** (cf. Rom. 1:18,27; Rev. 14:9-13; 15:3-4; 16:4-7; 18:4-6; 18:20-24; 21:5-8).

QUESTIONS:

1. How could the day of death be better than the day of birth? 7:1-7
2. Since life under the sun is meaningless, why counsel patience? 7:8-14
3. How can the Bible teach that we destroy ourselves by being overly righteous? 7:15-18
4. Isn't Solomon off-the-wall when he says he could not find one upright woman? 7:28
5. Should we obey the king (i.e., political authority) if he told us to do something wrong? 8:1-6
6. Would swift justice really deter crime? 8:11 How swift is swift?
7. Since there is so much injustice going unpunished, shouldn't we just give up and party? 8:14-15
8. Because we can't comprehend or discover everything that goes on under the sun maybe we ought to quit all scientific investigation and experimentation--Huh? 8:16-17

U. S. Supreme Court Justice Horace Gray (1882-1902) once said to a man who had appeared before him in one of the lower courts and had escaped conviction by some technicality: "I know that you are guilty and you know you are guilty. I wish you to remember that one day you will stand before a better and wiser Judge, and that there you will be dealt with according to Justice and not according to law."  
--Clarence E. Macartney

"Let justice be done, even though the heavens fall."  
---ancient Roman jurist

LESSON TEXT: Ecclesiastes 9:1---10:20

Prepared by Paul T. Butler, Th.D.

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS:

My parents, Drew and Lois Butler, enjoyed life on earth under the sun. They had their share of troubles, injustices, hard-times, and illnesses. They worked hard and faithfully and became skilled at their vocations. They relished those times they spent at church services, traveling, fishing, having family reunions, visiting with friends, and just puttering around the house gardening, writing poetry (my Mom) and listening to good music. They lived the last 10 years of their lives directly across the street from my home. My wife and I spent at least an hour (often more) every single day in their company. **But death came to Drew and Lois Butler, just as it does to everyone under the sun.** They died within 9 months of one another. They were gone from under the sun--totally, absolutely, irrevocably gone! I remember feeling like someone had slammed a huge, impenetrable, immovable door in my face. Under the sun (on the earth) there is life and there is death. Once death comes the enjoyment of life under the sun ceases! That is how Solomon saw the human predicament under the sun. Even James (4:14), in the New Testament, soliloquizes, What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

Solomon, contemplating the vanity of the tenuousness of life under the sun advised, Go, eat your bread with **enjoyment**, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already approved what you do...**Enjoy** life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life which he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun (Eccl. 9:1-10).

Praise God, because of the redemptive work of Jesus, those who accept Christ as Savior and Lord can look forward to a forever-life of **enjoyment** in a place that is far better than under the sun (Phil. 1:21-23). *And shouldn't that blessed hope give Christians every right and motive to **enjoy** life under the sun **more** than those who do not have that hope????*

QUESTIONS:

1. How could God allow Solomon to write that there is one fate (RSV) or destiny (NIV) or "same event" (ESV) for both the righteous and the wicked? 9:1-4
2. When a person dies does he/she stop knowing and thinking? 9:5-10
3. Can it be true that all of life is chance or fate? 9:11-12
4. If the poor man's wisdom is never heeded, why should the poor care about being wise? 9:13-18
5. Why does the heart of the wise incline to the **right**, and that of the fool to the **left**? 10:1-7
6. Do the proverbs in 10:8-15 all have the same point?
7. Why does Solomon pronounce woe upon a land which had a king who was a child? 10:16-17
8. Can it be possible that money is the answer for everything? 10:18-20

"When a patient completes tests at the Mayo Clinic he is frequently given a card on which is a diagram of a cross. On each arm of the cross is a word representing a main element by which a normal human being lives. The words are; work, play, love, worship. If the person examined seems to be short on one of these, it is indicated. Lopsided living is a common cause of ill health and boredom. The Mayo analysis is close to the Christian prescription for the cure of boredom." --Quote, *Unquote*, pp. 181-182

"Life becomes an exciting adventure when we expect at least one pleasant surprise each day; when we show our gratitude freely and unashamedly; when we strive to do at least one anonymous act of kindness to someone who needs it most; when we seek to discover the beauty and goodness in every person we meet." --William A Ward

"He who lives to live forever never fears dying."  
--William Penn

LESSON TEXT: Ecclesiastes 11:1---12:14

Prepared by Paul T. Butler, Th.D.

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS:

Charles Swindoll, in *Living On The Ragged Edge*, "The thing I love about Solomon's conclusion (Eccl. 12:13-14) is there isn't a ruffle of drums, a loud blast of the horns, and screaming clarinets with a crescendo of passionate emotion. There's just a simple statement. And Solomon doesn't try to be fancy about it either. When the conclusion has been heard, when it's all been said, it literally reads, Fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. Isn't that great? I love the anti-climactic ending to this incredible journal. We've been with him through every conceivable emotion, but now he finishes the entire work by saying that there are two things we need to pay attention to--two musts. First, we must *take God seriously*. Hold Him in highest regard. Respect and revere Him. Second, we must *do what He says*. Obey Him. You'd think Solomon slammed his journal shut and said, Now, I'm going fishing. Got it done. Got it said. But that's not all. He knows his readers would ask why. Why should I revere God? Why should I obey His truth? His last statement explains his reason. **Because God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil** (v. 14)."

Why does Solomon close with judgment? Because we cannot live the life of an irresponsible playboy and get away with it! We aren't free to run wild and wink in God's direction thinking that, no matter what, the Divine Grandfather-in-the-sky will yawn, pat us on the head, and say, "Everything's going to be just fine." It doesn't work like that! Our journey under the sun is headed for a sudden stop. And all alone, standing face to face with God in that epochal moment, we will give an account of the life we have lived. **Sobering, serious thought, isn't it?!** Do you want to know how to handle your life in light of such a day of reckoning? Would you like to know the secret? The password? In one word it is CHRIST! He alone is the Way, the Truth, and the Life Everlasting! Jesus Christ, alone, is the One who atones for mankind--He alone is capable and willing to intercede for us at the judgment day. Let us believe and obey Him NOW!

QUESTIONS:

1. Is helping others to *get* help from *them* a proper motive for giving help? 11:1-6
2. Why did Solomon speak of life on earth as days of light and life after death as days of darkness? 11:7-8
3. Why does Solomon pronounce "meaninglessness" upon youthfulness? 11:9-10
4. Do days of trouble inevitably follow days of youthfulness? 12:1-5
5. Where is man's eternal home? 12:5 How did Solomon know about it?
6. What is (a) "the silver cord"; (b) the golden bowl; (c) "the pitcher"; (d) "the wheel?" 12:6
7. How could Solomon know the spirit would return to God? 12:7
8. Do the New Testament scriptures agree with Solomon's resolutions to the meaninglessness of life under the sun? 12:9-14

"It should be remembered that young people have not yet been old, but older people have been young. So older people understand younger people better than younger people understand older people."

--J. C. Macaulay

"Young people simply have responded to propaganda and part of the propaganda, including that of the advertisements, is that youth is a better thing than age. So they conclude that 17-year-olds are naturally wiser than their fathers and mothers. They really believe this but they'll get over it. The wonderful thing about cockiness is that it can be overcome by a little maturity."

--Dr. Elton Trueblood

You, and I, are approaching the moment we stand before Almighty God at the rate of 60 seconds per minute --let us throw ourselves upon the merciful love of Jesus **with mind, heart and deed!** --PTB